

Phillip Knightley

Few sections of the media industry provoke such moral and ethical dilemmas for journalism.

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Back in 1975, examining the authenticity of all photographic icons for my book on war correspondents, "The First Casualty", I looked for answers. I could not ask Capa because in 1954, in Indo-China covering his fifth war, he stepped on a mine and was killed. But since it seemed unlikely that he would have gone through life without having told someone the circumstances surrounding the taking of his best-known photograph, I set out back in 1975 to try to contact those people he might have talked to about the picture. Henri Cartier-Bresson, Capa's professional associate in Magnum, the famous photographers' group, said he was not with Capa at the time, so could tell me nothing. Stephan Lorant of Picture Post said he had "no first-hand knowledge". Capa's brother, Cornell Capa said, "I had never seen or heard from Bob details about that particular photograph or that particular sequence." This was puzzling. Capa had apparently told none of the people closest to him how he came to take the photograph that launched his career. But then John Hersey, American author and a former war correspondent, wrote saying that Robert Capa had told him the story of the "moment of death" photograph and that Hersey had used this account in a review of Capa's autobiography, "Slightly Out of Focus."

Capa's version as told to Hersey, if true, suggests that the famous photograph was a million to one fluke. Capa said he had gone to Andalusia in August 1936. During one battle he was in a trench with a company of Republican volunteers who shouted "Viva la Republica", jumped over the parapet, and charged a Nationalist machine-gun nest. Hersey wrote, "As they charged, the photographer (Capa) timidly raised his camera to the top of the parapet and, without looking, at the instant of the first machine-gun burst, pressed the button. Two months later Capa was notified that he was now in truth a famous, talented, and nearly rich photographer, for the random snapshot had turned out to be a dear picture of a brave man in the act of falling dead as he ran."

This is an intriguing story. Some, including the writer Martha Gellhorn, who knew Capa when she was in Spain with Ernest Hemingway, believed it was totally feasible. Others, like Cornell Capa, believe that Capa was pulling Hersey's leg, which seems unlikely. But soon I had even stranger accounts. The late O. D. Gallagher, who had been a London Daily Express correspondent in Spain got in touch to say that Capa had posed the photograph. He said that at one stage of the war he and Capa were sharing a hotel room. There had been little action for several days and Capa complained to Republican officers that he could not get any pictures. Finally a Republican officer said he would detail some troops to go

with Capa to a line of trenches nearby, and they would stage some manoeuvres for him to photograph. Gallagher said Capa came back at the end of the day delighted with what he had taken.

Well, it is not unknown for photographers to pose pictures and there is other evidence that Capa did so. Some years ago, "Fotografia Italiana" published three Capa photographs taken during the Spanish Civil War, two of which are clearly posed. One shows nine Republican militiamen standing on the parapet of a trench grinning and waving their rifles in the air. The writer of the accompanying article on Capa, Piero Gardin, says he has examined this photograph and also the "moment of death" but--despite similarities in appearance--he has resisted the temptation to conclude that "the moment of death" soldier looks to be the same one "still alive" at the left of the posed group photograph.

But was the group photograph taken before or after "the moment of death" picture? If before, then why were the soldiers standing in full view of the Nationalist machine-gun nest that Capa told Hersey had killed so many Republican soldiers?

At this stage I had raised lots of questions but had no real answers. Then came a breakthrough. Capa had told Hersey that he had taken the million to one photograph in Andalusia in August 1936. Life had published it as "the moment of death" in July 1937,

in an issue to mark the first anniversary of the war. Had it not been published somewhere in the meantime? Gallagher vaguely remembered seeing it in a French magazine some time in September 1936. A search in French libraries located it in "VU" magazine, at the Bibliotheque Arsenal.

And, a big surprise, there turned out to be not just one "moment of death" photograph, but two. Under the heading "The Civil War in Spain: How They Fell" there were two half page photographs of a militiaman falling to the ground. The caption suggests that the photographs are meant to be symbolic: "Legs braced, chests bared, rifles at the ready, they stumble down the stubble-covered slope. Suddenly the momentum of the attack is broken. Bullets whistle, fratricidal bullets, and their blood is drunk by their native earth." But seen together, the two photographs put an entirely different complexion on the question of whether either or both of them were staged. Philip Gaskell, formerly Librarian and a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, writing in *Journalism Studies Review* of July, 1981, said, "Careful comparison of the two shows first that both were taken at precisely the same spot (proved by the pattern of long grasses in the foreground) and also that they were taken at the same time (indicated by the clouds, and by the lighting and shadows).

"In other words they appear to derive from the same photographic sequence.

Nevertheless, they are not two pictures of the same event. The soldier falling in the less-well-known shot is nearer the ground than the soldier falling in the 'moment of death'. But he still clutches his rifle in his hand, whereas the soldier in the first picture has already flung his rifle away.

"It is clearly impossible that the soldier in the first photograph could have fallen further towards the ground and at the same time have recovered his grasp on his rifle. It is equally impossible that the soldier in the second photograph could have risen from his splayed, almost prone position to the unbalanced fall shown in the first picture. So we have two photographs taken by Capa in the same sequence which show, twice over, a rifleman falling as if shot dead to the same spot of ground.

"The simple and obvious explanation is that neither of them shows an actual moment of death but that both were staged, and have a soldier (or perhaps two separate soldiers) falling to the ground in simulation of being shot. For what follows if they were not staged? Can we really believe that Capa was able to photograph the actual moments of death of two separate soldiers, in quick succession on the self-same spot, the body of one having been removed before the second one fell? Or that one of the two is of an actual moment of death, and the other one was staged immediately before or after the real one? Such suppositions are obviously

absurd."

There are two ways in which the issue could be resolved once and for all. Cornell Capa or Magnum could release the whole roll of film on which the two "moments of death" appear. We would then be able to see the sequence in which Capa took the shots, whether the posed photographs are part of this sequence and whether the "moment of death" was before or after the shot of the soldiers posing on top of the trench. To date Magnum has declined to do so. Or Life magazine could say what information it had that enabled it to so decisively caption the photograph "Robert Capa's camera catches a Spanish soldier the instant he is dropped by a bullet through the head in front of Cordoba" and from whom that information came. Capa? His agent? No one? I wrote twice to Life asking these questions but to date I have had no reply. Suppose Capa did pose the photographs, sent them off to his agent with a caption similar to the one used in VU, never claimed that they represented the "moment of death", and was surprised when Life appeared with the caption that turned a nondescript photograph into a valuable and much admired image. (Tom Hopkinson, the renowned photojournalist, believed that this was probably the case.) Could he have lived with this lie?

Easily, according to Christopher Ricks, Professor of English at Boston University and a Fellow of Balliol college, Oxford. In a review of Richard Whelan's

biography of Capa, Ricks writes, "This compelling photographer was a compulsive liar. A Pathe logical one . . . On almost every page (Whelan) has to tell you not to believe Capa. . . Capa invents, embroiders, co-opts. It may be a question of whether he did see, poignantly on the prison wall in Hungary, the pencilled names of two young Communist martyrs (he didn't - they weren't arrested till a year after he left Hungary).

"The woman he loved, Gerda, was killed in Spain in a hideous accident; Capa said she was his wife, which she wasn't, and said he was with her at the time, which he wasn't. Now it is true that the magazines for which he worked also regularly told untruths, to put it mildly. Life claimed that he had waded across the Segre river with troops in Spain when he had really been at a party with Hemingway and Malraux.

"But Capa caps the lot. His autobiography, *Slightly Out of Focus*, is apparently more a work of fiction than of fact. Again and again his claims are shown to be false. . . But the really disconcerting part is the doubt as to whether Capa's personal untruthfulness seeped into his professional conscience. . ."

Ricks concludes, "It is terrible to think that Capa may have been corrupted by the devilish imposture advocated by Henry Luce (editorial director of *Life*) as 'fakery in the allegiance to truth.' 'Capa arranged a whole attack scene: an imaginary fascist position was stormed. . ."

. ' What was that about (truth being) 'the first casualty'?" .

THE SECOND IMAGE is from the recent war in the former Yugoslavia. In July 1992 hundreds of TV crews and photo-journalists arrived at a Serbian detention camp called Trnopolje in northern Bosnia. Among them were Penny Marshall of ITN and Ian Williams of Channel 4 News.

In her award-winning report on 6 August, we see Marshall walk briskly towards a large group of Muslim men, some stripped to the waist, standing near a high barbed wire fence. She stretches out her hand to one emaciated man and says "Dober Dan ("Good Day"). The man (later identified as Fikret Alic, now living in Denmark) smiles, responds, and shakes her hand. The camera pans from his waist up to his chest where his ribs are starkly prominent behind the barbed wire.

Beamed around the world, and used as a grainy, still photograph in newspapers, the image changed the course of the war. In Britain two newspapers labelled it: "Belsen 1992". Another said, "A grim vision of a new Holocaust came to our TV screens last night." In Germany, a Berlin newspaper declared, "In Bosnia today a new Auschwitz is beginning." In the United States, ABC television said, "To see adults starving was like a throwback to the death camps of wartime Germany".

Less than 20 minutes after Marshall's report was broadcast on American TV, President Bush had changed his policy towards Serbia. In Britain, Prime Minister John Major recalled his Cabinet from holiday for an emergency meeting at which it was decided to send 1,800 ground troops to Bosnia. Within weeks the Serbs had closed down the camps but the picture of the emaciated Bosnian Muslim behind barbed wire had entered the iconography of war, and any sympathy the public might have had for the Serbs in this bitter civil conflict evaporated overnight.

Four years later, Thomas Deichmann, a German freelance journalist and lecturer, a former war correspondent in Bosnia himself, a professional witness for the defence at the War Crimes Tribunal, claimed that the picture is not what it seemed at the time. He said that the barbed wire, an essential element of ITN's image, was not intended to confine the Muslims but to protect a pre-war agricultural compound. Penny Marshall and her cameraman, Jeremy Irvin, had inadvertently entered this compound, so that if anyone was behind barbed wire, it was them. Further, the camp was a collection centre for refugees and many Bosnians had come there voluntarily to seek safety and could leave if they wished.

He first published these accusations in the Swiss intellectual weekly *Welt Woche*. Debated raged over who was right over the ITN image and did it matter, since, it was

argued, even if the details of this particular story might be misleading, it still represented "the greater truth" about the Serbs and their camps. Where does the ordinary truth lie?

There is no easy answer. You could write a book about the limitations and defects of the way today's television and photojournalism reports wars, its emphasis on human interest stories that end up distorting the issues; about the mind-set of editors which results in hundreds of photojournalists descending, pack-like, on what the office back home considers the story of the day; and about the pandering to public demand for easily-identifiable "goodies and baddies" in complex wars in which all the right is never on only one side.

I examined Deichmann's accusations and interviewed him. I viewed not only Penny Marshall's report but the outtakes, the material shot by the ITN cameraman but not used. I looked at what Penny Marshall and Ian Williams have said about the story since 1992. I sought the views of the War Crimes Tribunal and its investigators. And I tried to establish the atmosphere in Bosnia and London at that time.

Both reporters--Penny Marshall and Ian Williams--have expressed reservations about the way the images have been interpreted. Penny Marshall has said, "I totally refute the charge that the report was sensationalist. I bent over backwards--Bosnian Serb guards feeding the prisoners. I

showed a small Muslim child who had come of his own volition. I didn't call them death camps. I was incredibly careful. But again and again we see that image (the emaciated man) being used."

And Ian Williams, in an interview with the British Press Gazette, a magazine for the media industry, the month after the story, told of his concern over the reaction to the pictures: "In a sense it's almost the power of the images going two steps ahead of the proof that went with them."

There is no doubt in my mind that the barbed wire in the image was misleading. The main camp was not surrounded with barbed wire, as the War Crimes Tribunal agrees, but by a low chain-mail fence to keep schoolchildren off the road. As well, the barbed wire fence was no deterrent to anyone determined to escape because it was poorly constructed with wide gaps. What confined the Bosnians at Trnopolje, the War Crimes Tribunal says, was the presence of armed Serbian guards. So ITN was right in that the men in the film were detained in Trnopolje, but the image used to illustrate that was misleading because it implied that they were detained by the barbed wire. The barbed wire turns out to be only symbolic. Were all the inmates starving? No. Fikret Alic was an exception. Even in Marshall's report other men, apparently well-fed, can be seen, and the out-takes reveal at least one man with a paunch hanging over his belt.

So Thomas Deichmann is right in the sense that the ITN image is not quite what we all thought at the time. But aren't we blaming the wrong people? Television news being what it is, could we really have expected Penny Marshall or ITN's editors to have hedged such a powerful image with all sorts of verbal qualifications?

Part of the blame must lie with us. Our appetite for powerful images encourages photojournalists to give us "black and white" stories and reveals our reluctance to make the effort to understand the complexities of modern life.

*Phillip Knightley is the author of *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Kosovo (Prion)**

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